Dating 'The Creeping Man'

Preparing the facsimile edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man' over the last 18 months has been my most enjoyable research project so far. It hasn't mattered a jot that the critical reputation of the story is far from esteemed, with numerous previous readers having dismissed it as the detritus of the author's later Holmesian phase, and baulking at its supposedly flawed writing and bleak pessimism – or, as in the case of David Stuart Davies, pillorying the way it veers 'towards risible science fiction'.[1]

Because if you are a Holmes enthusiast, the pleasure of working on a facsimile edition of one of Conan Doyle's handwritten manuscripts[2] far outweighs any nagging negativity of the story's critical heritage, as you become intoxicated with what Walter Benjamin has called the 'aura'[3] of being in the presence of manuscript text, and the fascinating window it offers onto the lives and writing processes of the people who created them. There comes a point, however, when the critical sense kicks back in again, and your mind turns to the details and nuances of the story in front of you, as the first stage in thinking about how best to annotate the material in a way that will offer added value for readers who are extraordinarily familiar with it.

I have always been struck by the fact that although 'The Creeping Man' does not rank highly within the Holmesian canon, it contains some of Conan Doyle's best writing, notably in one of the most memorable examples of Sherlockian pithiness – 'Come at once if convenient – if inconvenient come all the same'[4] – and as well as that we find the warmly well-observed humanity of his portrayal of Watson, especially evident in his classic matter-of-fact diagnosis of Professor Presbury's extraordinary behaviour: 'Lumbago, possibly'[5]. But there is more to the story than a few fleeting moments of excellence. It also has a landmark status within the history of representations of the science of xenotransplantation, a bizarre topic that took up much of my time preparing a new introductory essay to accompany the facsimile volume. Furthermore, for Sherlockians the story has also always had its own significant position within the chronology of Sherlock Holmes's life and adventures due to its precise dating 'one Sunday evening early in September of the year 1903'[6] that places it as the bookend to Holmes's official career: 'one of the very last cases handled by Holmes before his retirement from practice'[7]. Because of this

precise dating it is one of the few stories about which there has been little debate as to its position within the Holmesian timeline, a consensus evident from William S. Baring-Gould's initial *The Chronological Holmes* (1955) to more recent chronologies such as Peck and Klinger's *The Date Being?*[8].

Which made it all the more perplexing when I first read through Doyle's handwritten manuscript and noticed something wasn't quite as I had expected it to be. For it reads not 'it was one Sunday evening early in September of the year 1903', as every other version of the story I had read up until that point, but rather 'it was one Sunday evening early in September of the year 1902'. '1902', not '1903'. I checked and re-checked Conan Doyle's writing, at first imagining I wasn't reading his cursive correctly. But there could be no doubt, it was definitely '1902'.

I subsequently became aware that this difference in dating is also present in both versions of the story that were published in March 1923, in *The Strand Magazine* and *Hearst's International*. And that it was not until the first editions of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, published in June 1927 by John Murray in the UK and G. H Doran in the US, that the switch of date to '1903' becomes evident. Where, as we know, it has stayed ever since.

Now, for the general reader this alteration will be of little moment. What difference could it make if the story takes place in 1903 or one year earlier? But for those most interested in the minutiae of the timeline of Holmes's life and adventures, this is genuinely intriguing. Because without a precise setting of the autumn of 1903 then the position of 'The Creeping Man' potentially shifts in the Holmesian chronology, and is perhaps no longer quite so noteworthy as it had seemed when it was viewed as the final story before Holmes's retirement. And whilst this bookending chronological position might not have significantly enhanced the critical reputation of the story, it did at least give it a certain cachet, marking the conclusion of Holmes's official career as a consulting detective and serving as the gateway not just to the small number of tales that Conan Doyle himself wrote about Holmes's retirement, but also to the wider world of pastiche fiction and adaptation that begins with the premise that the Great Detective has retired. In a very real way 'The Creeping Man' has been the precursor to the mini-cottage industry of texts that re-imagine Holmes's later years which include more recently Mitch Cullin's novel *A Slight Trick of the Mind* (2005), and its film adaptation *Mr Holmes* (2015), starring Sir Ian

McKellen. Whereas if the setting of 'The Creeping Man' had remained as '1902' in all subsequent editions of the story then it would have had no symbolic importance as a landmark in the life of Sherlock Holmes. It would also have meant that the details of Holmes's later career would have been imagined differently, with a different Holmes story becoming his 'last [official] case' - 'The Three Gables', or 'Shoscombe Old Place', or 'The Mazarin Stone', perhaps.

So, why (and indeed precisely when?) did '1902' become '1903'?

The first, and perhaps most obvious of the possible explanations is that Conan Doyle himself was responsible for the change, intervening in the editing process whilst the collected edition of *The Case-Book* was being prepared. This would have been sometime in the period between the serial publication of the story in earlier 1923 and the volume publication in June 1927. And yet, whilst in many other circumstances the idea that the author edited his text might feel likely, if this were true in the case of Conan Doyle then it would confound critical wisdom as to both the nature of his writing process and also his level of interest in Sherlock Holmes later in his career. Because he has always been seen as a rather slapdash writer, rushing things to completion with little revision and editing, and this tendency is often seen as even more pronounced in his later years when he appeared to have been writing his Holmes stories purely for financial reward rather than writerly pride. So, if it turned out that he was far more engaged in editing the minutiae of his work than has usually been presumed, and both that he had a really tight grasp on the fine detail of his Holmesian fictional world and cared enough about such matters of detail (names, dates) that he thought it vital to adjust even the most minor of inconsistencies, that would be worthy of note; we would think of him anew. Yet, for devoted Holmes readers the very idea seems fanciful – incompatible with the fact that we already know that he left *in* numerous other inconsistences and errors in collected editions of his Holmes stories, including within 'The Creeping Man' itself – where the oddity of the character 'Trevor Bennett' being inexplicably addressed as 'Jack' by his fiancé remains.

The second possibility is that it was an editor/publisher who made the '1902' to '1903' revision. They certainly would have had the opportunity to do so. It would have needed to be someone who was involved in the publication process for *The Case-Book* and not the serial versions of the story, or else they would surely have made the change earlier, and they would

have had to have been in a position to insist on an amendment in both the UK and US publications of the collected stories. They would also – and this is perhaps the most obvious problem with this theory – have had to have had an extraordinarily detailed, overarching grasp of the whole Sherlockian Canon. Only then would they have appreciated the significance of this change of date in the Holmesian chronology, and thus knew to insist on it being made; any general reader would not have had such an appreciation. So, if we judge this explanation to be the most feasible then we are pushed then to seek out the identity of this person – someone fundamentally involved in the publication process who displayed the extremely impressive level of knowledge of only the most avid of Sherlockians. Could it be, in the decade prior to the establishment of *The Baker Street Irregulars*, there was a particularly devoted Sherlockian quietly playing their own part behind the scenes re-shaping the nature of the Canon as we would come to know it?

The third possible explanation, and the one perhaps easiest to dismiss – is that it was simply a mistake. That when the story was copied across from the serial-magazine version to be included in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, someone made an error of transcription. These things, obviously, happen. And yet, not only would this have needed to happen in a way that copied the error into both UK and US volume publications, across different publishers, but we would then be faced with the extraordinary coincidence of someone making just the necessary error that by happenstance pushes the story in-synch with the overarching chronology of the life of Sherlock Holmes. Surely this is one step of coincidence too far.

The exciting thing for Sherlockians is that when original handwritten manuscripts become accessible for the first time such new questions and debates emerge, meaning that even in the twenty-first century some of the Sherlock Holmes stories remain what the textual critic John Bryant calls 'fluid' texts[9]. They are not 'immutable'[10], and, rather wonderfully, allow readers fresh opportunities to excitedly ask new questions of material they previously thought they knew.

[1] Stuart Davies, 'Afterword' to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Oxford World Classics (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p. 198
[2] The manuscript is now part of *The Arthur Conan Doyle Collection, Lancelyn Green Bequest*, under the custodianship of the city of Portsmouth. For further details of the publication itself see http://www.visitportsmouth.co.uk/conandoyle/TheCreepingMan
[3] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schokhen Books, 1969), p. 4
[4] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man' in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 50
[5] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man,' p. 56
[6] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man,' p. 50
[7] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man,' p. 50
[8] Andrew J. Peck and Leslie S. Klinger, *The Date Being..?: A Compendium of Chronological Data* (New York: Magico Press, 1996).
[9] John Bryant, 'Witness and Access: the uses of the fluid text,' *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 16-42 (17)
[10] Bryant, 'Witness and Access,' p. 17